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Local News

Stellar event in Hilo

Big Isle astronomers open a big window into their universe

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Hawaii Island's world class observatories celebrated the International Year of Astronomy by opening their Hilo headquarters Saturday for a "Galileo Block Party" that featured free tours, music and science demonstrations.

"There are probably over a thousand people here right now," Gloria Chun Hoo, marketing and public relations manager for 'Imiloa Astronomy Center, said soon after the start of the afternoon event.

A half-dozen observatories, with staff from around the globe, closed off part of the University of Hawaii at Hilo's Science Technology Park to provide a safe area for the throngs of participants.

Attendees talked with the people who operate the telescopes atop Mauna Kea, watched live video feeds from several countries, collected trading cards, and even met the featured participant.

"They're all very enthusiastic to learn about science, particularly astronomy, and I'm happy that everyone has gathered to celebrate my (accomplishment,)" said "Galileo Galilei," the Italian astronomer credited with inventing the modern telescope 400 years ago.

Saturday's Galileo usually answers to Leslie Kelly, a UHH performing art student who volunteered for the leading role.

Those who went to each exhibit and got their passport checked earned a free visit to 'Imiloa, Chun Hoo said.

"This is an important piece for the International Year of Astronomy," she said. The event took more than a year to plan.

Hawaii's astronomers are often busy with their work, but were available Saturday to meet with the public, she noted.

"Here's an opportunity for scientists to share what they know with the community," Chun Hoo added.

Among them was Masahiko Hayashi, director of the Subaru Telescope, which is the National Astronomical Observatory of Japan. The Subaru Telescope is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

As he helped children look through a telescope pointed at the moon, Hayashi said astronomers face two daunting questions: understanding "dark energy" discovered a decade ago, and determining if life exists beyond our solar system.

Believing that Earth's creatures are not alone, Hayashi said he's certain that work to be done this century will determine if his theory is true.

Inside the Subaru Telescope, employees had arranged computer monitors providing live, nighttime views of space from Florida, Chile and the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa.

"It's very impressive," said Dennis Onishi, a county councilman from Hilo, after touring the facility.

Jaden Castillo, 9, of Hilo was fascinated with the remote images and the overall event.

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Subaru Telescope astronomer Olivier Guyon, rear, gives keiki a look at the quarter moon through his 20-inch homemade telescope. - William Ing/Tribune-Herald

"Except for the weather," he said of the scorching afternoon sun. "It's hot."

Although interested in space, Castillo said he's been told he has an even higher calling to pursue.

"I do have that feeling that I'm going to be a pastor," Castillo said when asked what he wants to be.

To simulate what happens when an asteroid hits a planet, members of the UHH Astrophysics Club offered demonstrations using a spinning bicycle wheel and a volunteer sitting on a rotating disc.

Cameron Flores-Oishi, 7, of Hilo learned that when he held the spinning wheel, the energy transferred through his body and turned his seat. He said that was the coolest activity yet.

"I like space," Flores-Oishi said when asked what he hopes to become when he grows up. His answer: a scientist.

Saturday's open house also appealed to adults, including some who were visiting Hawaii Island. California residents Diane Lord and John Douglass heard about the event by reading information obtained at the airport.

"I thought it was interesting, but it was kind of over my head. But he understood it because he's an engineer," Lord said of observations of gas clouds being studied by astronomers at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory's Submillimeter Array.

The event was a "very nice treat," she said.

"Since we like being scientific, we made it a point to come," Lord added.

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